THE ROLE OF TRIGGERING STRATEGIES IN THE FOREING LANGUAGE CLASS

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1. WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN INSTRUCTING STUDENTS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: FROM PAST TO PRESENT

Many people believe that given the fact that language is a complicated phenomenon human beings may enjoy for pragmatic purposes, language teaching must be accordingly complicated as well[1]. Thus, we can read sentences like: "Language (is) such a complex and many-sided thing that there (is) at the present no all-embracing theory which (brings) every aspect of the problem within a single coherent and mutually consistent set of propositions" (Corder, 1973: 81); however, despite this intrinsic difficulty, learners do, at least to some extent, learn languages. This could be used as an indicator: the contribution of teaching seems to be thus guaranteed.

For years and years, the researchers' most important research question was how to sequence the seemingly "discrete" linguistic items so as to design the most effective FL teaching method. In this light, it is important to remember how: "teaching is not the terminal objective of what happens in the classroom. In the end, it is changes in the students' behavious upon which success or failure depends" (Lewis & Hill, 1985: 8); however, in spite of the truth this proposition embraces, there are still groups of teachers who are constantly seeking "the" method, in the conviction that there is "a best" one. For those groups, let's remember that we can also read nowadays sentence such as: "There is no such thing as *the* classroom. Classrooms vary in many ways" (Cook, 1991: 129). In the same breath, we could also say: there is no such thing as *the* method, there is no such thing as *the* learner, there is no such thing as *the* materials, and so on. Different situations will call for different methods, different activities, different techniques and different strategies. Or, said it in other words, there is no such thing as *the* teacher's performance, but all the above referred elements will have to be decided by the teacher[2] each time he faces the challenge of teaching to a new group, without neglecting the role and specific contribution to the whole FL acquisition process.

In any case: "the learner of a second language is preparing to use that language for certain purposes, in certain roles and in certain situations" (Corder, 1973: 65). So, as people generally learn languages as a way to participate in the social life of a speech community other than theirs, the particular aims to pursue each time need to be specified. These aims can be expressed:

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(1) cf. Lewis & Hill (1985: 8).

(2) In every learning situation we can ever certainly think of, it seems reasonable to assume that the teacher's responsibility goes further beyond what actually takes places in the classroom.

—in terms of what *teachers* think learners should learn, or

—in terms of what *intentions* learners should be able to perform, or

—in terms of what *functions* they should perform.

Language can be seen in many ways and from many perspectives, but for teaching purposes, it is particularly important to choose *what, how* and *why,* in accordance with the aims previously stated. For quite a long time, the only objective stated was a mere *linguistic competence* to be acquired by the students. With the passage of time, the accumulated evidence of the lack of ability of many students to use the target language for communicative purposes a bit more complicated than the mere simple exchanges previously practised in class, made scholars review the taxonomy of priorities to pursue. Hence, they decided to be more comprehensive in the definition of the objectives. Consequently, if the ultimate objective at which to aim while teaching a foreign language nowadays is to develop in learners "communicative competence", not only will teachers have to be in charge of the actual sequencing of activities and materials for the linguistic development of the students, as well as the allocation of time for each of these activities, but they will also have to carry out a previous exercise in reflecting upon all the series of conditions which may constrain that particular group of students' process of learning.

It is precisely in this light, that it is generally regarded as a major duty for teachers to keep abreast professionally, being acknowledged with any new perception or understanding related to the learning process, while finding out, at the same time, what the most appropriate framework for deploying learning in their actual context is[3]. In order to be able to do it efficiently and effectively, however, not only the accrue of instruction accumulated by the teacher will be enough, but it will also be crucial that teachers should be fully acknowledged with the main components that define their learners' particular situations, namely, context, personal variables and reasons to study that language. Among the countless myriad of contributions from the SLA research field in the last years, it is important to highlight the realization of the pre-eminence of the learner, as the core element in all this formal language teaching operation, once it has been agreed the centrality of his/her figure in the whole process. Hence the suitability to focus and pay close attention to everything that this figure entails, the aim being the achievement of effective and long-term results during the learning course[4].

In fact, from the 60s onwards, maybe due to the somewhat inconclusive results of many comparative studies that had been carried out among several methods, the researchers' main interest shifted from a focus on the teaching side of the operation that takes place in the FL

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(3) In that sense, SLA (=Second Language Acquisition) research is a comprehensive enough field so as to provide FL (=Foreign Language) teachers with new ideas derived from the observation, analysis and systematic study of every aspect related to and implied in the FL process. The conclusions drawn from the multiple analyses already carried out within the scope of that field —or even those data coming other source disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, linguistics, anthropology, or neurolinguistics, among others— are at the teachers' disposal to inform them about any topic or aspect that has to do with non-native language teaching.

(4) It appears pertinent to remind at this point that, despite the pre-eminence of the learner, it is considered as so against a background of valid research to validate and support the appropriateness of the implementation of certain teacher performance rather than another: "Since the 1960s, there has been an increasing attempt in research on teaching and learning from instruction to relate the major features of teacher and student behaviour in classrooms to learning outcomes. (...) The fundamental goal of most such research has, of course, been to determine which variables best, or more frequently, lead to academic achievement. (...) Probably the ultimate objective of classroom research is to identify those characteristics of classroom that lead to efficient learning of the instructional content, so that empirically supported L2 teacher training and program development can be implemented" (Chaudron, 1988: 1). Accordingly, we may reasonably expect that the more efficient language teaching methods become, the more effective FL learning will naturally turn into.

classroom, to the learning side of it. The result of this apparent change of perspective in their main core which has given rise to a new one does not necessarily mean ignoring the effect of instruction or neglect the "teaching facet" of all this operation, but, on the contrary, the challenge is now to devise those methods that, taking into account the multitude and broad range in learners' variability and circumstances, are able to tune into their neccesities to be facilitative in their learning process. In other words, it is believed that an increased sensitivity on the part of the teachers towards the learners themselves may benefit the development of the pupils' target language competence. After all, the idea that any "appropriate instruction will undeniably make a contributuion"[5] is permanently present, and the special interest in taking into account as many as possible of the total amount of the learner's defining characteristics is equally valid.

In order to pursue his/her learners' learning, every teacher must start by recognising that his/her aims regarding *what* and *how* to teach, however comprehensive they may be, can´t help being somewhat limiting to the always potential possibilities of entering into contact by means of the FL of the students, as it would bring the students back to the amount of linguistic experiences accumulated during their period of learning.

In that sense, it is generally accepted nowadays that learning a FL involves much more than the bare memorisation and rote learning of rules and vocabulary, and the acquisition of a reasonably good pronunciation, as some old methods would have claimed in the past, endeavouring to find the most suitable combination of these elements. The support of this formal point of view would completely have overlooked the fact that language learning is not a mere accumulation of set habits. We can count nowadays with the light shed by the *communicative approach* to language teaching fulfilling any FL class with real-like situations in which students must use the target language to solve different tasks of a communicative nature. Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language code but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately in any given situation. It deals with the social and cultural knowledge speakers are presumed to have to enable them to use and interpret linguistic forms. After all, who would deny nowadays that the ultimate objective at which to aim while teaching a foreign language should be to develop in learners this ability to react and perform linguistically through the FL? Nobody would, I suspect. It is precisely in this cast, that we must do our best to try to simulate actual communicative circumstances as far as possible, whereas responding to our students' main interests and needs in learning. However, providing students with a meaningful and authentic use of language is still not enough to automatically deduce that our students are really acquiring the kind of language they may afterwards need for different purposes once they leave the classroom.

The appearance of linguistic units or meanings not previously encountered by the students while they were with their teacher in class could mean a serious impediment to the communication process. Hence the importance of adding an *additional perspective* to any teacher's performance: *training students how to become better learners* so that they develop the confidence and ability to cope with any hindrance when interacting through the target language. It is very important to teach students how to be better students, how to resort to different strategies to avoid a breakdown in the communicative situations they may ever find themselves in.

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(5) cf. Larsen-Freeman, D. & M.H. Long (1991: 6).

In that sense, an analysis of the behaviour of those students who seem to be specially talented for a language, with an ability to pick up the target language may be used as guidance to create a climate in class in which students gradually become more and more competent in the L2 by means of the *deployment of strategies.* The study of the characteristics of these students' behaviour will certainly provide us with the advancement of the design of more effective methods, so it is important not to neglect the contribution of the learner to the 2LA process. The observation of this fact has led many scholars to study in depth and analyse what is typical in the behaviour of those gifted students. The contribution of the learners has been paramount for L2 researchers: "Classroom researchers have focused on learners' verbal and social interactions and have inferred learning strategies from learners' behaviour in such interactions" (Chaudron, 1988: 90).

The study of the students' attitudes and motivation, their personality, their performance and cognitive traits shown during the FL class are also considered critical factors along the whole learning process. The main question researchers have to address now is the following: Is learning a FL a matter of producing the target language in a wide variety of circumstances, is it a question of generating input from others or is it an issue of engaging in communicative tasks that require negotiation of meaning? In any case, the training of students as effective learners is seen as something absolutely unrivalled in any FL learning situation. By means of the progressive acquisition and deployment of learning strategies, students may little by little become FL users. They may learn not just a linguistic system plus an ability to communicate, but the ability to solve any problem of a potential lack of clear communication.

Hence, teachers must enhance their awareness of the figure of the learner and focus on it. The adoption of this ***learner-training approach*** will embrace manifold invaluable aims, which go further beyond the deployment of learners' communicative competence to enable them to develop and make use of any available means and aid for their communication, either when producing or receiving messages. In order to attain this goal, the deployment of those specific strategies that suit them best on any occasion will become a requisite. Thus, the foreign language class will imply much more than presenting and practising structures and instances of language. It will almost become a *court for student-training,* providing them with a sound knowledge regarding how to cope with any potential hindrance that they may ever encounter in their potential communicative interaction with other speakers, creating a more comprehensive atmosphere inside the classroom, preparing, guiding and assisting students in their learning process. By means of this ideal climate, students may thus enjoy the advantage of living an accrue of linguistic experiences in class with their mates, whereas they learn how to extend the most appropriate behaviour as efficient foreign language learners when they are outside the class, to take the most of any communicative situation they might ever find themselves in.

2. COGNITIVE THEORY AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In recent years, researchers have turned away from strictly linguistic based theories, not only to pay their attention to the figure of the learner as the main core of the whole FL process, as it has been pointed out above, but also towards the field of cognitive psychology, in an attempt to explain better all the processes involved in 2LA. Cognitive approaches to language acquisition conceive language as a complex skill that can be described within the context of how people acquire and store knowledge in general.

In this sense, John Anderson's information processing model of cognitive skill learning[6] has been quoted most frequently in the research literature as a possible framework for the explanation of 2LA (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Cook, 1993). In this sense, it has been argued that 2LA cannot be fully understood without taking into account the interaction between language and cognition in the storage of information in memory and in the acquisition of new information.

The representation of knowledge in memory is a key concept in Anderson's theory. He makes an important differentiation between "static" information, or knowing about something, which is referred to as *declarative* knowledge, and "dynamic" information, or knowing how to do something, which he calls *procedural* knowledge[7]. Declarative or factual knowledge is stored in long term memory in the form of abstract terms (cognitive units of meaning) such as *prepositional networks* (associations of meaning between important elements in a sentence), *images* and *schemas:*

"A schema (...) is a data structure for representing the generic concepts stored in memory. There are schemata representing our knowledge about all concepts: those underlying objects, situations, events, sequences of events, actions and sequences of actions" (Rumelthart, 1980: 34).

The values of schemas in the process of language comprehension is obvious: "They facilitate making inferences about concepts. Schemas also enable us to organize and understand new information" (O'Malley, Chamot & Walker, 1987: 290).

However, this mental structure which constitutes "declarative" knowledge, consisting of relevant individual knowledge, memory and experience, which allows us to incorporate what we learn into what we know, is not sufficient to explain language acquisition, and that is why Anderson introduced the concept of "procedural" knowledge. "Procedural" knowledge refers to the ability to carry out a particular skill. It refers to the process involved in learning how to do something successfully. As far as language acquisition is concerned, procedural knowledge refers to our ability to understand and produce language.

Accepting that 2LA is a cognitive skill implies that researchers will have to apply the main principles of cognitive theory to the processes of language acquisition. To start with, the distinction made by Anderson between declarative and procedural knowledge has got obvious implications for both theory and practice in 2LA. Faerch & Kasper (1985, 1987) were the first to apply this concept to the field of 2LA. They underlined that the learner's declarative knowledge consisted of internalised language rules and memorized chunks of language whereas procedural knowledge were those strategies and procedures used by the learner to process L2 information for acquisition and use. Anderson (op. cit.) had stated that procedural knowledge can only be the result of a gradual process in which the learners are offered countless opportunities in which to get practice.

This distinction recognized that simply knowing "about" the language is never enough if what the learner pursues is to be able to use the language for communicative purposes. Successful communication requires from the learner to have acquired the necessary procedural knowledge, which, in Anderson's terms, can, as we said before, only be mastered slowly and after a great deal of practice.

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(6) cf. Anderson (1980, 1983 & 1984).

(7) cf. Gagne & Paradise (1961), Gagne & White (1978) or Brown & Burton (1978).

With all this in mind, it becomes clear that L2 teachers need to concentrate all their efforts on providing learners with communicative activities which focus on language as the acquisition of a skill rather than as an object of study in itself.

3. LEARNING PROCESSES AND STRATEGIES

One of the basic premises of the cognitive theory just outlined is the tenet that learners do not merely acquire knowledge but rather that they construct it by using their previous experience to understand and shape new information. Thus the role of the teacher throughout the 2LA process is no longer viewed simply as the mere supplier of information related to the target language, but s-/he is to play an active role in the process of knowledge formation together with the learner. Students' knowledge thus is constructed, not only "inherited" from the teacher. This means that instruction is not transformed directly into output, but that learners will have to build up their knowledge actively and meaningfully through the activation of mental processes.

From this perspective, learners stop being the passive recipients of the FL teaching process, but for the learning to take place, the learner must actively participate in the process[8]. For successful target language learning to occur, learners must have a definite goal to aim for (for example, the completion of a particular learning task) and they must be fully committed to the achievement of such a goal.

Cognitive psychology regards *learning* as a *process* of *processes;* this means that the acquisition of knowledge involves the activation of certain mental activities which will have to be adequately planned in order to accomplish initial expectations.

In recent years, the field of cognitive psychology has tried to locate and identify the cognitive processes employed by individuals as they learn, and they have become the major focus of educational innovations in schools. The identification and diagnosis of these processes is what will permit the setting up of programmes aimed at improving the quality of learning, and here is where the role of strategies becomes important. Learning depends on what the learner does, on the processes s-/he uses when learning and therefore on the strategies which develop these processes.

4. PROCESSES AND STRATEGIES

Researchers do not use terms like *process* and *strategy* consistently. Sometimes they are used as synonyms for general mental operations and at other times to differentiate operations involved in language processing. A widely accepted definition of process and strategy is the one put forward by Faerch & Kasper (1980) according to whom a "process" implies a sequence of operations in the development of a plan, as in reception or production processes, whereas a "strategy" is defined as a single operation or feature of that process. That is to say, processes refer to internal practices which involve the manipulation and transformation of incoming information. These processes constitute the goals of the various learning strategies. Strategies consist of behaviours or concrete mental operations related to a specific goal which are carried out by learners at the moment of learning. They are special

(8) Participating in the process of learning requires the activation and regulation of many additional factors such as previous knowledge, motivation, interest, attitudes, beliefs about learning, new information, abilities and strategies.

thoughts or behaviours that learners use to help them comprehend, retain and/or use the information. Strategies act to facilitate mental processes, differing from these non-visible processes in that they are open, operational and functional. These behaviours are observable, either directly or indirectly, during the learning process, and are, therefore, susceptible to teaching and training.

To supply and promote the development of learning strategies in students is, in fact, to guarantee the quality of their learning. It is not a question of teaching students new contents, but rather of training them in the acquisition of a skill which, once learnt, can be transferred to other moments or situations, facilitating in this way the learning process. It is, therefore, a question of *learning to learn.* Learning is no longer restricted to the acquisition of content (declarative knowledge) but to the acquisition of skills (procedural knowledge) with which to learn this content.

5. STRATEGIES FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

On reviewing the existing bibliography on strategies of foreign language learning, we find an absolute lack of a systematic taxonomy. As Oxford (1990: 17) points out: "there is no complete agreement on exactly what strategies are; how many exist; how they should be defined, demarcated and categorised; and whether it is possible to create a real, scientifically validated hierarchy of strategies". Cook (1993) states that unless the SLA/FLA strategy paradigm finds a consistent conceptual framework in which linguistic acquisition, language learning in classroom settings and cognitive psychology are combined and their scope limited, LA strategy researchers will continue to offer biased taxonomies of language learning strategies claiming theirs as the best set of categories.

It is not within the scope of this study to offer a comprehensive and detailed account of the strategy research carried out up to the present moment, but simply to highlight those most relevant research findings in the filed of learning strategies which might shed some light on the field of FLA.

6. HOW CAN TEACHERS TEACH STUDENTS HOW TO LEARN?

Nobody would even doubt nowadays that it is vital that learners learn how to learn the target language effectively in order to become eventually successful FL users of that language. A good starting point in this ***learner-training approach*** might be to invite students in class to share their ideas about language with other students, so that they can learn from each other and be thus much better prepared for the process of learning the language: what they imagine language is like, what sensitivities they have, what use of language knowledge they make. Another important issue for discussion is what they perceive learning a language to be like, and what they compare it with. How they view the process of teaching and what they can say about being on the receiving end of tests. By means of questions such as these to discuss, activities to realise and suggestions, teachers may prompt in students a process of ***language-learning-awareness,*** something which means the first step in the path towards successful FLA.

The following stage in this ***learner-training process*** is the one in which teachers could help students to adopt certain attitudes and to emphasise certain behaviours that might increase their language proficiency. In this sense, it is important to notice that there is no

full agreement in what makes a good strategy[9], yet it is obvious that people who are good at languages tackle L2 learning in different ways from those who are less good or efficient. Naiman *et al.* (1987) tried to see what people who were known to be good at learning languages had in common. They found six broad categories of strategies shared by the so called *Good Language Learners,* namely: "find a learning style that suits you", "involve yourself in the language learning process", "develop an awareness of language both as a system and as communication", "pay constant attention to expanding your language knowledge", "develop the L2 as a separate system" and "take into account the demands that L2 learning imposes".

Extensive research that has gone much deeper into learning strategies has been carried out by O'Malley & Chamot (1990) within an overall model of L2 learning based on cognitive psychology. They have found three main types of strategy used by L2 students:

1. *Metacognitive* strategies involve planning and thinking about learning, such as planning one's learning, monitoring one's speech or writing, and evaluating how well one has done.
2. *Cognitive* strategies involve conscious ways of tackling learning, such as note-taking, resourcing (using dictionaries and other resources) and elaboration (relating new information to old).
3. *Social* strategies mean learning by interacting with others, such as working with fellow students or asking the teacher's help.

In their study, O'Malley & Chamot (op. cit.) found that the type of strategy called for varied according to the task the students are engaged in and also according to the level.

7. HOW CAN TEACHERS MAKE USE OF LEARNING STRATEGIES?

All the students (both the good ones and the poor ones) must always be encouraged to develop independence inside and outside the classroom. This is where *learner-training* has a crucial role to play: equipping the students with *the means to guide themselves* by allocating and devoting actual time to explaining strategies to them.

Strategy training assumes that conscious attention to learning strategies is beneficial, and, in a sense, assumes that the strategies are teachable[10]. Research by O'Malley & Chamot (1990) provides some encouragement for strategy-training. They taught EFL students to listen to lectures using their three strategies. One group was trained in cognitive strategies, such as note-taking, social strategies, such as giving practice in reports to fellow students. A second group was, in addition, trained in metacognitive strategies, for example, paying conscious attention to discourse markers such as "first", "second", and so on. A third group was not taught any strategies. The metacognitive group was better than the control group. Given the fact that this experiment only lasted 50-minute lessons spread over eight days, this seems as dramatic an improvement as could reasonably be expected. Training students to use particular learning strategies improves their language performance. But, as O'Malley & Chamot (1990) found, teachers may need to be convinced that strategy training is important, and may themselves need to be trained in how to teach such strategies.

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(9) Some factors may influence and even be determinants of the success or failure of a given strategy. cf. McDonough, 1995: 20-22.

(10) A thorough approach to strategy awareness is seen in the textbook *Learning to Learn English* (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989), which aims "to enable learners of English to discover the learning strategies that suit them best".

In this sense, a good guide for teachers, *Language Learning Strategies* (Oxford, 1990) provides a wealth of activities to heighten the learners' awareness of strategies and their ability to use them.

In any case, either by explicit instruction or by means of an awareness-raising process, there is no doubt of the invaluable role teachers should play in the deployment of successful strategies on the part of their students so as to achieve a more efficient performance throughout the whole FL learning process.

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